



Economically Disconnected Families Involved with Child Welfare Services in Washington State

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Introduction

The initial report from the Washington Statewide Survey of Child Welfare Involved Parents (hereafter referred to as the Parent Survey) documented the economic distress of primary caregivers who are involved with the child welfare system (Marcenko, Lyons, & Courtney, 2011; Marcenko, Newby, Lee, Courtney, & Brennan, 2009). This report seeks to further our understanding of the economic condition of caregivers and their engagement with the child welfare system by focusing attention on economically disconnected families. Economically disconnected is defined being disconnected from both employment and cash assistance from the government (Acs & Loprest, 2004). This is an important focus because evidence suggests that parents' economic connection is related to case outcomes. Families who lose welfare after the child is removed have a lower rate of reunification (Kortenkamp, Geen, & Stagner, 2004). In this report, we quantify the extent of economic disconnection among child welfare involved families, document the characteristics and needs of this group, and examine the impact of disconnection on parents' engagement with child welfare services.

We found that 20% of the families were disconnected, reporting no employment or cash assistance. Forty percent of families were receiving cash benefits but reporting no employment (benefits only). Another 40% of families were receiving employment-related income from the primary caregivers' job or their partners' job (employment connected). A closer look at the benefits only group reveals a mixed source of income. Almost two-thirds of the benefits-only group receive TANF, almost half receive SSI, and one-quarter receive GA. About 25% of the employment-connected group also report income through government benefits.

Who are the economically disconnected caregivers?

Our analysis reveals several patterns that differentiate economically disconnected caregivers from those who receive benefits or are connected to employment. Disconnected caregivers are younger and had children at younger ages than more connected households. Most are under age 30. They are more likely to have children in out-of-home placements as opposed to receiving in-home services. The disconnected caregivers are more likely to say they get aid from their social networks. Close to half report financial help from friends or family and more than one out of five currently live with friends or family.

In terms of economic and physical well-being, disconnected caregivers are worse off than employment-connected caregivers. Compared to those with paying jobs, the economically disconnected report greater material hardship, more unmet needs, and higher levels of drug and alcohol use.

Disconnected caregivers and benefits recipients report similar levels of material hardship, but the disconnected caregivers report higher levels of unmet needs regarding assistance on basic economic and medical needs. *Eighty-four percent of economically disconnected caregivers report an unmet basic need, including over 40% reporting an unmet need for help finding a place to live, obtaining medical services, finding and keeping a job, applying for aid, and obtaining a GED or other credentials.* In each of these categories disconnected caregivers report more unmet needs than benefits-only or employment-connected caregivers.

Are economically disconnected caregivers less engaged with child welfare?

Disconnected caregivers report lower parental engagement than other caregivers. Specifically, we examine parents' investment in – and expected benefit from – working with child welfare (or “buy-in”). We tested the relationship between economic disconnection and caregiver engagement while controlling for basic demographic characteristics (such as age, race, and education), chronic risk factors (such as drug abuse and depression), and whether a child was placed in out-of-home care. *Even when controlling for these factors, economically disconnected caregivers report lower engagement.* This is important because studies show that buy-in is related to workers' recommendation for reunification (Holland, 2000).

How can we explain these patterns?

In relying on data collected at one point in time, we cannot distinguish whether these patterns describe caregivers more likely to be economically disconnected or whether the process of child welfare involvement leads to particular types of disconnection. On one hand, caregivers who can neither sustain employment nor successfully claim benefits may have difficulties providing adequate environments for their children. On the other hand, we may be observing caregivers who were economically connected through their children but lost connection when their children were removed from the household because cash assistance from TANF and child SSI are contingent on having children in the household (or expecting reunification within 180 days).

Similarly, the levels of reported assistance from friends and family may mean that private, not public, assistance is sustaining these apparently disconnected caregivers. Perhaps these younger caregivers have not yet exhausted their private support networks. On the other hand, facing barriers to seeking public assistance, or losing it, may increase efforts to seek private support. We are unable to distinguish whether informal economic support means that these seemingly disconnected caregivers are also supporting themselves through illegal activities.

What are the implications for practice and policy?

Clearly, economically disconnected caregivers are less engaged than either those receiving benefits or those who are employed. They are also more likely to have children in out-of-home placement, which is in itself related to lower parental engagement (see the full discussion paper at partnersforourchildren.org/knowledge-center). Additionally, disconnected caregivers report substantial unmet basic

needs, which suggests that social workers encounter unique barriers when working with this group.

Poverty is an enduring characteristic of parents involved with the child welfare system. Assisting parents in obtaining any benefits they might be eligible for could improve their ability to provide for themselves and their children and may increase their level of engagement with child welfare services. During the period of data collection policy changed in Washington State to extend from 90 to 180 days the time a parent can continue to receive TANF if children are absent from home and expected to return within 180 days (WAC 388-454-0015, August 2008). Additional investigation is needed to see how the waiver process is being used across the state.

Meeting the complex needs of child welfare involved families is best achieved through close collaboration among an array of service providers. Our findings suggest that coordination between economic services and child welfare presents an important opportunity to meet the most pressing needs of families. Additional work is needed to examine the most promising avenues for strengthened coordination.

The West Coast Poverty Center and Partners for Our Children are currently undertaking additional research using administrative data on caregivers involved with child welfare to examine economic connections before, during, and after involvement with child welfare. Multiple years of administrative data will allow us to examine the fluidity between these groups and the ordering of events. This research should shed additional light on to what extent disconnection is a chronic problem that predates child welfare involvement, and to what extent involvement precipitates disconnection. Answering these questions will provide a more complete base of knowledge for intervention.

The West Coast Poverty Center at the University of Washington serves as a hub for research, education, and policy analysis leading to greater understanding of the causes and consequences of poverty and effective approaches to reducing it in the West Coast states. Founded in 2005 with core funding by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (OASPE), the Center draws affiliates from the UW Schools of Social Work, Public Affairs, and Arts and Sciences.

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